



doi 10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00051-7

## GENDERING AND RACIALIZING ISRAELI JEWISH ASHKENAZI WHITENESS<sup>☆</sup>

ERELLA SHADMI

Department of Criminology and Law Enforcement, Beit Berl College, Doar Beit Berl 44905, Israel

**Synopsis** — The article explores the ways that Ashkenazi power has been constructed and asks if and how ethnicity structures the existence of Ashkenazi women. It also examines whether there are additional principles organizing Ashkenazi women's experience in Israel. I begin with a discussion of the methodological-conceptual framework within which I position my analysis. Section 2 shows how ethnicity structures the experience of Ashkenazi women, especially through geographical and social segregation. Section 3 will argue that Ashkenazi women were required to perform an important function for the Zionist revolution: to establish the affinity between the revolutionary nature of Zionism and the continuation of Jewish tradition. In the final section, I will show how Ashkenazi women's endless struggle for an autonomous identity became a central element of our experience, and how the quest for power hindered this struggle. Throughout, the discussion—both historical and conceptual—is supported by the stories of Ashkenazi women of my generation. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

As I attempt to understand Ashkenazi<sup>1</sup> (white European/American Jewish) cultural identity, I find myself going back and forth between two points of reference. One denies the possibility of its existence, claiming that being Ashkenazi (“Ashkenazi-ness”) is constituted by nothing more than having power and control in the state of Israel (Hitron, 1996). The second perspective assumes not only that Ashkenazi cultural identity is real, but also that it controls every aspect of Israeli experience (Kahati-Bruner, 1997). This article is informed by both these perspectives. It explores the ways that Ashkenazi power has been constructed and asks if and how ethnicity structures the existence of Ashkenazi women. It also examines whether there are additional content, specific organizing principles, and a unique worldview that are associated with being an Ashkenazi woman in Israel.

Thus far, Ashkenazi women have only been identified as such in discussions by Ashkenazi men

(Berkovitch, 1999), which focus on Ashkenazi women's role as wife and mother, and by Mizrahi women (Dahan-Kalev, 1997), exposing Ashkenazi women as oppressors. The first of these perceptions overlooks Ashkenazi women's Ashkenaziness; the second—their gender. Ashkenazi women have thus far been described and understood only in terms of those at the centre of power in Israel and those on the margins.

This dual discursive representation reflects the ambivalent position of Ashkenazi women as “the powerful powerless,” that is, as those for whom the tension between power and oppression is part of their identity and experience. How is this ambivalence experienced? Are Ashkenazi women aware of the tension? Does an Ashkenazi woman ignore her powerlessness in order to become powerful? Does she identify herself with the powerless or with the powerful (irrespective of gender)? The discourse about Ashkenazi women is also problematic because it is both external and partial: it is partial because it relates only to one piece of the whole experience (of womanhood in the male discourse and Ashkenaziness in the Mizrahi discourse); and it is external because it overlooks the point of view of Ashkenazi women themselves. This external and partial gaze constructs Ashkenazi women in accordance with the functions they fulfill for either the benefit of Ashkenazi men or the detriment of Mizrahi women. In both discourses, therefore, Ashkenazi women remain objects.

My thanks to Smadar Lavie, Avital Schlanger, Rina Peled and Diana Keller for their insightful comments which have significantly improved this article. Also, the contribution of Ronit Lentin of the WSIF is gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>☆</sup> An earlier version of this article was published in Hebrew in Yael Azmon (ed.) (2001), *Will You Listen to My Voice? Representations of Women in Israeli Culture*, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute/Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House.

This article is an attempt—by an Ashkenazi woman—to rid ourselves of this paralyzing gaze. This article is written from the point of view of Ashkenazi women reflecting on and looking at, not the other, but ourselves. This perspective confronts us with the doubts, dilemmas and conflicts that an outer-subjective gaze cannot see or chooses not to see. It also enables us to look at the assumptions and the practices—racist, ethnic, class, sexist, ageist or other—that are part of being an Ashkenazi woman.

Placing the experience of Ashkenazi women at the center poses a difficult challenge. How does one do so while at the same time heeding the criticism of Mizrahi women (Dahan-Kalev, 1997; Shiran, 1992, 1996; Shoat, 1996), who correctly argue that Ashkenazis always take centre stage? How does one uncover the unique point of view of Ashkenazi women (regarding themselves, Mizrahi women and Israeli society) and at the same time remain alert to the racist attitudes and prejudices they may conceal, while not invalidating what Ashkenazi women have to say because it may be construed as racist?

I believe that the self-reflection of Ashkenazi women—the thread running through this article—makes it possible to deal with this dilemma. I insist on meeting these challenges, and I have made a conscious attempt to carefully listen to my own inner voice and to that of other Israeli Ashkenazi women, bearing in mind the critique by Mizrahi feminists, and to remain aware of my personal status as a member of this hegemonic group.

I begin with a discussion of the methodological-conceptual framework within which I position my analysis. Section 2 looks at the way ethnicity or “race” structures Ashkenazi identity. Sections 3 and 4 focus on other principles that organize Ashkenazi women’s experience. Throughout, the discussion—both historical and conceptual—is supported by the stories of Ashkenazi women of my generation.

### THE METHODOLOGICAL- CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WOMEN AS FREE SUBJECTS OF EXPERIENCE

The Ashkenazi women I describe below are ordinary women reflecting on their daily lives. Specifically, though not exclusively, the article focuses on women who immigrated to Israel in the 1930s (I will call them the Mothers’ generation) and women who were either born in or immigrated to Israel around its establishment in 1948 and who came to adulthood in the first two decades of statehood, the 1950s and 1960s (the Daughters’ generation).

What follows is an attempt to draw one possible model for describing and interpreting the lifecourse of Ashkenazi women. Needless to say, my analysis should not be construed as a comprehensive account of Ashkenazi women’s experience in Israel. The discussion—in one sense, an exploratory journey into the secret places of a hegemonic group—is only a beginning in what is a new discourse in Israel. It rests on three data sources: personal stories, a study of feminist organizing in Israel, and the researcher’s personal experience.

I derived some of the personal stories of Ashkenazi women through personal contacts and stories I heard told by others. Other stories arose out of the meetings of “the Ashkenazi group,” seven Ashkenazi feminist women, myself included, who began meeting in June, 1995, and continued to meet regularly for about 2 years to discuss our racism toward Mizrahi men and women and our identity as Ashkenazi women. These stories were told by women from diverse backgrounds in terms of class, education, country of origin, age and the length of time they have been in Israel, although most of us are highly educated secular Jews who are middle class today, but who grew up in working-class families.

My second source of data is an examination of feminist organizing in Israel. Special attention has been given to women’s peace organizations and especially Women in Black,<sup>2</sup> in which I have been active since 1990. I have tried to discern the conceptual meanings implicit in the practices of these organizations, especially the position of Mizrahi women (and, to some extent, lesbians and Palestinian women) in the women’s peace movement, and to ask questions about the movement’s social and ideological meanings and its impact on society’s power relations.

As an active participant in both the above sources of data, my status in the research process deserves attention. The personal experience of the researcher has rarely been an epistemological and methodological source for either examining issues of identity or developing feminist theory in Israel (for an exception, however, see Motzafi-Haller, 1997). In using my personal experience in this work, therefore, I deviate from social science and academic feminist practices in Israel. Using my own experience enables me to deflect the Western colonial gaze, which examines and defines the other, and to concentrate instead on looking inward, into myself and into the hegemonic group of which I am a part. Like most of my research subjects, I am an Ashkenazi woman, born in Israel, highly educated and currently middle-class with working-class origins. Being a feminist also shapes my inquiry.

The discussion of Ashkenazi identity inevitably raises issues of power. Following Patricia Hill Collins (1990, p. 225), I take issue with the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless. I no longer see the radical-feminist paradigm of power and domination as useful, important as it was for its time. The paradigm entails polarization between victimizers and victims, those who dominates and those who are dominated, to the point of being perceived as powerless objects whose identities have been erased. In a similar vein, I see as problematic the Foucaultian argument (Foucault, 1981) that power is distributed everywhere and that its use is not necessarily intentional. This stance seems to imply that men, for instance, as individuals and as a collective, are freed from taking responsibility for oppression. Instead, I adopt a paradigm of freedom (whose source may be found in the fourth chapter of Hegel's "Phenomenology of the Spirit"; Hegel, 1977), which does not minimize men's power, but at the same time does not make women into ultimate victims.<sup>3</sup> It acknowledges the oppressive conditions under which women live, but, nevertheless, sees them as moral agents capable of making moral choices (Hoagland, 1988; Thompson, 2001).

According to this paradigm, women live in a cultural and individual context that has been forced upon them by men. However, within the confines of coercion, the dynamic between the genders is not only one of domination—submission, but also leaves room for choice, albeit limited. Resistance to coercion constitutes, therefore, the extent to which we exploit the resources available to us as well as how we use these resources to negotiate ideas, ideologies, myths, beliefs and structures of meanings into which we enter and on the construction and definition of which we have no control.

Perceiving gender relations and ethnic relations within this paradigm redefines the questions that need asking: In which circumstances, for which reasons and to what extent do women (or Mizrahi women and men) choose to enter into a dialogue with the dominant culture, and when is such dialogue avoided? Within the cultural and situational limitations forced on them, that is, under oppression, do women have any room for resistance, and, if so, to what extent do they use it? What kind of dialogue is developed between the self as a totality of experience—including its sensual, emotional, physical and intellectual dimensions—and the language, myths and ideologies that give it meaning? What kind of collective and individual identity is being constructed: submissive, subversive or revolutionary? Why and under which circumstance is identity constructed? Under which conditions does submission turn into, or not turn into, subversion and rebellion?

## DESERT AND REVOLUTION: THE IMAGINED VACUUM AND THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF OPPRESSION

Nira<sup>4</sup> (a member of the Ashkenazi group, born in Israel in the late 1940s):

I grew up in the centre of Tel Aviv, not very far from Meir Park. Many of the streets had yet not been paved, so we spent many hours deep in the soft, light sand of the dunes. In fact, the dunes played a major part in my childhood, as did the swamps and the desert, since I imagined Israel in this way: swamps in the north, desert in the south and dunes—here, in Tel Aviv. The mean and cowardly Arabs had run away and I hardly ever had a chance to meet the new immigrants (from Arab countries). In short, it was an empty, desolate land. And we, the children, were meant to conquer the land and make the desert bloom. It was exciting but also frightening.

I first learned about the *shtetl*<sup>5</sup> from the stories of Mendeleh Mocher Sefarim<sup>6</sup> which were in the curriculum of the higher grades of elementary school. From these and other stories, the *shtetl* seemed to me a faded town in which the houses were near collapse, sewage ran in the streets, and a moldy smell filled the air. Poverty, misery and neglect were everywhere, and there was not a single flower or plant anywhere. I was ashamed of this *shtetl*, and I was ashamed of my ancestors who learned to live with it and who accepted it.

My mother and father hardly ever mentioned the *shtetl*. Until this day I really don't know if they or any of their families ever lived in one. My father told me about Lorelei, a legendary woman of the Rhine River [in Germany] whose enchanted singing turned the heads of sailors until they sank into the depths. My mother taught me to sing "Volga, Volga" and to recall with yearning the wide river in which she swam as a child. Thomas Mann and Goethe, Tolstoy and Gogol regularly visited our living room.

The early socialist Zionists who founded the State of Israel aimed to build a new country and to create a new Jew. In order to construct a new Jewish order, they followed the model celebrated by the Communist hymn, the Internationale (which we all knew by heart) "No more traditions chains' shall bind us." (The Hebrew version puts it even more forcefully: "We shall destroy the old world to its end"). In other

words, Zionism denied, silenced and negated almost everything that preceded it. The hostility toward and delegitimization of the Jewish diaspora, Jewish tradition and ghetto life, the silence surrounding the Holocaust and the denial of the existence of the “other” in the Land of Israel were central to Zionist ideology. The impact of this denial was the construction of the Land of Israel and the Jewish people as a discursive desert: a physical, cultural and human desert ripe for cultivation by the “new Jew.”

The image of Israel as a land empty of people prevailed for many years, as attested to by the lasting popularity of a song by the Israeli song-writer Naomi Shemer, “Jerusalem of Gold,” written in 1967, on the eve of the Six Day War:

The wells ran dry of all their water,  
Forlorn the market square,  
The Temple Mount dark and deserted,  
In the Old City there.  
And in the caverns in the mountain,  
The winds howl to and fro,  
And no one takes the Dead Sea highway,  
That leads through Jericho. (Shemer, 1967, p. 40)

In this imagined Israel, the Palestinian existence had been erased or, at least, belittled and mocked. Likewise, the significance of the Jewish community in Palestine, in which mostly Mizrahi and *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) lived for generations prior to the arrival of the first Zionist immigrants from Europe, was minimized (Peled, 1995, p. 174).

From the early Zionist perspective, the Jewish diaspora was not only unsafe and dangerous, it also represented a lifestyle that was enfeebled, idle (Almog, 1997), and feminine (Gluzman, 1997; Lentin, 2000). The Holocaust was a cause of shame to the Zionists, who saw its victims as lambs easily led to slaughter. The Holocaust, therefore, was best left unspoken. The physical destruction of the majority of Europe Jewry only served to strengthen the Zionist perception of the Zionist homeland as a desert.

The centrality of this desert image, an accretion of the triad of denials described earlier (of diaspora life, the Holocaust and the “other”), lay the foundation for a constructed social consciousness of imagined vacuum—a historical, cultural and territorial void. This consciousness of vacuum was necessary to create a space for building a new nation, a new Jew, a new idea. This new consciousness was a powerful means of recruiting diaspora Jews either to “make aliya” (literally “ascend,” or immigrate) or to fund the Zionist endeavor. It was also a powerful motivator for Israeli Jewish youth to settle and work the land.

Vacuum was necessary for the creation of a new collective identity for the first generations of *Sabras* (children born in Israel),<sup>7</sup> which we rapidly learned to adopt (Almog, 1997). It also contributed to upgrading the perception of Israel as the ultimate solution to the “Jewish Problem.” Since both constructions were perceived as necessary conditions for nation building, the desert imagery and the consciousness of imagined vacuum increasingly received support and legitimization and became essential elements in the narratives of the founding of the State.

Thus, repression and denial of the “other” (on otherness, see de Beauvoir, 1953; Hooks, 1989) have been well entrenched in Zionist consciousness from its earliest days and have served as the conceptual underpinnings of the construction of the Hebrew “I” and the Palestinian “other,” and, in turn, supported the legitimacy of the appropriation and colonialization of Palestinian lands. The distinction between the *Sabra*, the “New Jew” and the Palestinian “other” became a relevant social and political distinction. Thus, a complex and dialectic relationship was established between consciousness (imagined vacuity), ideology (Zionism) and practice (oppression).<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the triad of denials, the non-negation of Europeanism (Said, 1978) in the process of constructing the imagined vacuum is conspicuous. Like Nira, who grew up on German poetry, so Zilla (born in Israel in the 1950s) talks about a childhood filled with the music of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart, books by Bertolt Brecht and Shakespeare and admiration for Michaelangelo and Van Gogh. This cultural background was shared by many Ashkenazi women of her generation.

Europeanism—a particular aesthetic-spiritual content coupled with a critical, secular and well-educated attitude (Evron, 1997; Mohanty, 1985)—far from being denied or repressed, served as the model for secular Israeli culture, filling the imagined vacuum with a new collective identity.

The desert imagery was applied to the diaspora, the Holocaust and the “other,” but not to Europeanism. In fact, by preserving European culture, early Zionist ideology gave lie to the reality of vacuum. But the imagined vacuum assured the incontestable entrance of Europeanism into the seemingly hollow collective identity of the new Israeli *Sabra*.

Organizing the imagined vacuum on a European-only basis, in which Palestinians do not exist, turned “race” into an irrelevant variable in Zionist ideology, which was however rendered non-racist, or at least racially neutral. Because Europeanism was so clearly prioritized over Arabism and Mizrahiness, the latter were rendered invisible.

Thus the desert imagery served to oppress unwanted identities and traditions (Palestinians, the pre-Zionist Jews in Palestine, Israeli-born Mizrahis, diaspora Jews). Likewise, the consciousness of imaged vacuum served to absorb and assimilate desired identities and cultures (European and Western). Although this process occurred in historical reality, it was hardly noticed by Ashkenazi Israelis.

Following the establishment of the State and the large influx of immigrants from Arab countries, consciousness of imagined vacuum continued to prevail in the Ashkenazi community, but, vacuum through ethnic segregation and social geography, it took on new meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Nira: "All my friends in school and in the youth movement, as well as the teachers, the principal, the movement's leaders, the members of the kibbutzim<sup>10</sup> where we spent our vacations—all were Ashkenazi. There were also (the Mizrahi) Esther Mizrahi and Nissim Bechor, who changed his name to (the Ashkenazi name) Gideon, but nobody thought of them as "Mizrahi." Mizrahi people were those who lived in the *ma'abaro*th (transit camps for new immigrants), not here. We knew about immigration, but in Tel Aviv I did not see any *ma'abarah* and even the vendors at the outdoor market were, I remember, Hana Elenberg from Poland and Baumgarten the shopkeeper from Germany (all Ashkenazi)."

Chava: "Towards the end of the seventh grade, after we passed the qualifying exam [which determines high school eligibility], everyone, teachers and students, remarked with satisfaction—and today we may add, arrogantly—that the class's urchin, a thin Mizrahi boy whose name I've forgotten, passed the test successfully. This is almost the only memory I have of Mizrahi people at school. There were none in the youth movement."

The seclusion of Mizrahi people enabled the Ashkenazi community to maintain its consciousness of imagined vacuum. The Ashkenazi-only "social geography" was one of the community's central practices (see also Ya'ari, 1996). The existence of other ethnic groups thereby escaped one's notice, so that Ashkenaziness could be constructed not only as non-racist, but also as non-ethnic. Indeed, Ashkenazi people in Israel were privileged in all spheres of life—in education, in employment, in culture and in politics—but this privilege was invisible due to the exclusion of other ethnic and racial groups.

Mizrahi people settled in segregated "development towns"<sup>11</sup> and neighborhoods on the outskirts of large cities. The physical segregation, however, was never perfect. The boundaries between the two communities partially overlapped in two ways: first, there was physical contiguity between Ashkenazi areas and Mizrahi areas (for example, in Jerusalem the Ashkenazi area of Rehavia abuts the Mizrahi area of Nahla'ot, and the development town Kiryat Shmona is built in the midst of kibbutzim in the Upper Galilee). Second, Ashkenazi communities usually included one or two Mizrahi families. This partial overlap was an important element in preserving the myth of equality, but it is also used to rebut the charge of Ashkenazi racism.

The charge of racism is especially problematic for the Ashkenazi community: First, it undermines the myth of the ingathering of exiles and the One People myth, so central to Zionist ideology. Second, as victims of the most cruel of racist ideologies, the Holocaust, Ashkenazi Holocaust survivors find it difficult to acknowledge their own racism. The partial physical segregation between the two communities made it possible for the Ashkenazis to structure their identity as entirely egalitarian, non-discriminatory, just and non-racist.

With the passing of time, physical segregation decreased and ethnic groups began to physically mix with one another (by, for example, marriage), but the invisibility of the Mizrahi people continues through mechanisms of social segregation, that is, the homogeneity of the circles in which we, Ashkenazi people, moved. The social segregation and its attended privileges were strengthened in two ways. First, by the Holocaust and the resultant Ashkenazi sense of ultimate victimization that no Mizrahi could approximate. Second, Ashkenazi privilege was served by preserving and sanctifying the mythology of the Zionist pioneers (*Halutzim*) and their children, the *Sabras* (Almog, 1997), built on a strict observance of Ashkenaziness.

As a result of the social and physical segregation, race and ethnicity were perceived by Ashkenazi people as irrelevant, as the Ashkenazi group's responses illustrate:

Navah: "I don't know what it is to be Ashkenazi at all. I am Jewish. I am Israeli. I am Western. I am a woman. I don't know at all why they call me Ashkenazi. I am not sure that there is something like that except in their own heads."

Yael: "Is there a difference between Ashkenaziness and Westernism at all? Is there something called Ashkenazi identity at all?"



Nira: "I remember a students' party many years ago where I was chosen, as a kind of joke, as the 'typical Ashkenazi.' I was deeply hurt. What does it have to do with what and who I am?"

Ashkenazi women understand their Ashkenazi origins as a fact one has to live with, like eye color and hair type, but not something with which they identify or would use to describe themselves. The Ashkenazi women I spoke to define their identity in terms of their parents' country of origin, their religion, class or education. Their cultural identity is taken for granted and they do not perceive their Ashkenaziness as ethnicity. They tend to view themselves in one of the following ways:

- \* Having no cultural identity at all, as "culture" refers to the "other."
- \* Belonging to a disadvantaged group of Ashkenazis with no access to power, stressing their apparent marginality. In the Ashkenazi group women pointed to their past as immigrant girls growing up in residential schools, or to their origin in a disdained ethnic subgroup like German or Polish Jews (about which many jokes were made in Israel).
- \* Belonging to a culture defined as "Israeli" and therefore unspecifically marked (cf., [Frankenberg, 1993](#)).

Ashkenaziness is seen as the dominant culture through mechanisms such as social geography and its partiality, social seclusion and the denial of cultural identity. These mechanisms constructed it as ethnically neutral.

Undeniably, the experience of the Ashkenazi hegemonic group is more diverse than has been described here. There are ultra-orthodox and secular Ashkenazi women, there are working class and wealthy Ashkenazi women. It may reasonably be assumed that the mechanisms of hegemonization act in a similar way upon all members of the Ashkenazi community. However, the diversity within the Ashkenazi community should give rise to doubts about a sharp dichotomy between "oppressors" and "oppressed," and strengthen the conception of the "powerless powerful" presented in the first part of this article.

Ashkenaziness is thus a category constructed by issues of ethnicity and race just as masculinity is constructed by issues of gender and class. The system of ethnic differentiation shapes the lives of Ashkenazi

women as much as it shapes the lives of Mizrahi women. This has yet to penetrate the consciousness of most Ashkenazi women in Israel who continue to perceive "race" and "ethnicity" as someone else's, the "other's," not as their own.

To summarize thus far, I have argued that Ashkenazi existence during the pre-State era and following the establishment of the State of Israel was shaped by the consciousness of imagined vacuum. At the beginning this consciousness was formed through the imagery of a physical, historical and cultural desert, resting on denial and silencing and, later, on a social geography constructed by ethnic segregation. Both strategies accorded privilege for Ashkenaziness over Mizrahiness and Westernism over Arabism. This privilege, though part of everyday life, was not experienced as such by Ashkenazis. The denial and invisibility inherent in these strategies ultimately led to oppression, discrimination and racism. Thus, the social and political distinctions between Jew and Palestinian, and between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi are an organic Israeli innovation that grew out of the oppression of Mizrahis and Palestinians by Ashkenazi Jews.

### TRADITION AND REVOLUTION: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW JEWISH IDENTITY

The issue of ethnicity structures the experience of Ashkenazi women. What are the other principles structuring that experience? I will argue, first, that Ashkenazi women were required to perform an important function for the Zionist revolution: to establish the affinity between the revolutionary nature of Zionism and the continuation of Jewish tradition, though this function is officially denied and silenced in the Zionist movement. Thus, Ashkenazi women contributed significantly to the construction of the new secular Jewish identity. In the final section of this article I will show how Ashkenazi women's endless struggle for an autonomous identity became a central element of our experience, and how the quest for power hindered this struggle.

Nira: "My father was too old to volunteer for the *Palmach*,<sup>12</sup> but until his last day he was a loyal and devoted member of the Organisation of Haganah Veterans. Accompanied by my mother, he went regularly to the organisation's meetings. He pinned his Haganah medal to his shirt collar with obvious pride, and he volunteered whenever he could for Civil Defense duties.

"I never saw him or my mother go to a synagogue, although my mother encouraged me to join our neighbor when he went to High Holiday services. And Mother made special preparations each Sabbath: Thursday nights my sister and I had to take a 'long bath' (in contrast to the fast daily shower) and Mother would change the bed linens. On Friday evening she made us put on a carefully ironed Sabbath dress, and we all went to visit Grandma. Mother lit the Sabbath candles and recited the blessing according to tradition. When cooking, she separated the milk pot (which I still have) and the meat pot, although she never made the kitchen *kosher*.<sup>13</sup> Toward Passover<sup>14</sup> we, my sister and I, were recruited (to our great resentment, of course) to clean our home carefully, especially the kitchen, and to take down the holiday dishes from the top cupboard. As the holiday approached—in fact, any Saturday—Mother sent samples of her cooking to the neighbors and received food from them. On holiday evenings she secretly gave alms to the postman, the street cleaner and the stair cleaner. From time to time she invited them in for a cup of coffee and piece of cake, so they would rest and she could listen to their tales of woe."

"Mother fasted every Yom Kippur<sup>15</sup> and if my father's sneers at her religiosity were not too much, she continued the fast for 24 hours. Out of respect for the rabbi who lived next door, Mother kept the radio down on Sabbath and holidays."

"Father respected the rabbi, too, but he rejoiced at the rabbi's dismay when his daughter became an airline stewardess or when the rabbi's son, my playmate until the age of 13, whispered in my ear, 'You don't know how much I envy you!'"

Like other radical movements (Peled, 1995; Stite, 1989), the Zionist movement was not entirely revolutionary; rather, it preserved some attachment to the past and to tradition. Zionism strove to be revolutionary and innovative, and therefore invented the vacuum, but it did not cut itself off totally from Jewish tradition. It attempted to integrate the new and the old, the secular and the religious; it sought an appropriate mix of the values of the secular Enlightenment, Jewish history and religious tradition (cf., Peled, 1995).

In order to integrate elements of tradition into its revolution, Zionism employed an ancient patriarchal mechanism still embedded in Jewish culture (Azmon, 1995)—the separation of the spheres of interest and influence between the sexes: The public sphere for

men, where the revolution would be carried out, and the private sphere for women, where the relationship between the Zionist revolution and Jewish tradition would be established. Zionism made clever use of the traditional role differentiation between the genders to both foment revolution and, at the same time, preserve tradition. The way gender roles had traditionally been structured drew the dividing lines of the new Jewish identity: integrating while delimiting revolution and tradition, negating the exile side by side with preserving the past, modern and secular elements blending with religious and traditional elements of Judaism—these polar opposites epitomizing Zionism were embodied in the *Sabra* boy and his *Sabra* girlfriend, the Ashkenazi man and his Ashkenazi female companion.

Preserving tradition and at the same time furthering the revolution was particularly difficult during Zionism's early decades. The acceptance of Zionist ideology, especially its negation of the "ghetto mentality," precluded the possibility of returning to the traditions of the diaspora. Moreover, the supremacy of the new and revolutionary as basic values made observing religious tradition almost an act of heresy. Upon coming to Israel, the pioneers rejected or left behind the institutions historically vital for the survival of Jewish tradition—synagogues, rabbinical schools, Halachic literature and rabbis. In such circumstances, it was difficult to determine what Judaism was and, therefore, it was particularly difficult to provide the newly emerging Jewish nation with a Jewish way of life.

These complex circumstances together with the secondary status of women defined both the arena and the means for actualizing the new Jewish identity. Historically, whenever Jewish men's identity as Jewish men was constrained, the Jewish home became the central arena for actualizing Jewishness. Correspondingly, women's role as teachers of the next generation was emphasized. This was what happened with the secularization and assimilation processes in Eastern Europe and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Hyman, 1997). And this also happened during the early period of the Zionist revolution. Preserving Jewish tradition during this period happened mostly in the privatized family domain. A new kind of Jewish popular culture was created in Israel with a mixture of customs, rituals and relationships, all related to women and family life.

Edna (of the Ashkenazi group): "I have lived with my partner for more than 30 years now, and we have three adult daughters. We are opposed to religious coercion, and therefore we were never

formally married, even though if we were free to choose from a number of options, I would probably choose an orthodox (Jewish) ceremony.

“My second daughter recently went to the United States to marry a non-Jewish American. He has lived here for a few years and wishes to spend his life in Israel. As soon as they are married, they will return. For a long time I’ve wondered what kind of a gift I would like to give her. Finally I decided that the best present I could give them are Shabbat candlesticks. I went to the same store I used to go to with my mother. The man who owned the store was of my mother’s generation, and his son, a childhood friend of mine, now runs it. He showed me many different candlesticks. I couldn’t make up my mind, Yemenite candlesticks and modern ones. The choice was difficult. And then the owner, pointing to one pair, saying carelessly, as if he were talking to himself: ‘These are the style your mother used to buy.’ Those are the candlesticks I gave to my daughter when she came back from America as a married woman.”

Debra (an orthodox woman whose hair is gathered up and covered in the orthodox tradition; she is a life-long peace activist who took part in the weekly vigils of Women in Black): “Taking part in the vigil every Friday at noon is part of my preparation for the Sabbath: Just as I clean the house, cook for the Sabbath and light the candles, so I also participate in the vigil. This protest against the occupation is not only part of my self-purification for the Sabbath, it is also a way of fulfilling the mitzvot (religious dictates).”

Shira (pointing to the banner of Women in Black she was holding): “The same way religious women light the Sabbath candles, I light the banner to remind Israelis of the ongoing occupation of the Palestinians.”

The Sabbath stands at the centre of the new Israeli Jewishness, and at its heart is lighting the candles, traditionally performed by women. Various habits, reformulations of past heritage, marked the preparation for the Sabbath: changing the bed linens, taking a bath, putting on Sabbath clothes, showing respect for older parents, and giving aid to the needy (as Nira’s mother did) and the oppressed (as Debra and Shira do). These customs, which reflect physical and spiritual purification (in place of the *mikveh*),<sup>16</sup> lead to the moment of transition from the secular weekdays to the holy Sabbath, which begins with a mother light-

ing the candles. The mother thus becomes central symbol of secular Judaism. It is she who says the blessings and who passes on the traditions of physical and spiritual purity. The mother is also responsible for preserving the connection with family members and ancestors (by lighting memorial candles for the dead and paying annual visits to the cemetery) and with the future generation of Jews (by transmitting the tradition of lighting the Sabbath candles, as Edna did with her daughter). In this way the mother symbolizes the continuous, yet renewed flow, from past to future and takes the place of religious teachers who were traditionally responsible for preserving Jewish religious practice.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the centrality of the Sabbath in the new Israeli Judaism, other Jewish holidays and customs became symbols of the new religion. This Judaism draws upon the spiritual elements of Jewish tradition: at its centre stands the relation between a person and his/her friends and community (rather than between a person and her/his God).

Israeli Mothers thereby created a less demanding, more vital alternative to past Jewish tradition (Kalderson, 1997). Ashkenazi women in Israel constructed a version of Judaism suitable for a democratic and secular state, which is also founded upon the religious identity of the nation. This version of Judaism integrates present and past, revolution and tradition, a religion which is integrated with the secular, Western way of life, a version of a nation in which nationality overlaps with religion, and Israeliness overlaps with Jewishness. Ashkenazi women’s important contribution to building the Jewish national homeland is their success in giving shape to secular Judaism in Israel, thereby creating a bridge between “the new Jew” and his or her Jewish past. This new secular Jewishness together with the European Enlightenment was the foundation stones in the construction of the dominant Israeli culture.

### REVOLUTION, TRADITION AND OPPRESSION: SECULAR JUDAISM, GENDER AND ETHNICITY

The new, secular Israeli Judaism was constructed within the existing power relations and oppression, the imagined vacuum and ethnic segregation discussed above, and woman’s inferior status. In this section I examine the impact of these frameworks of oppression on the experience of Ashkenazi women. My central argument is that these factors gave rise to the distinctive character of Ashkenazi women’s experience: a desire for personal fulfillment and a yearning for power.



Nira: “It was always clear to my sister and me that we would end up in a kibbutz. Personal fulfillment for us meant serving our homeland and finding satisfaction and identity in the service of our country. We had always been told, boys and girls, whatever our ethnicity or sex, that we were liberated from the shameful past, that we were destined to conquer the desert and to be ‘guardians of the homeland.’ We girls were taught to love the paratroopers and admire the airforce pilots. Only today, now that the illusion has faded, can I admit to myself that even then I envied and hated boys. Their power pained me. Next to them I felt humiliated and vulnerable, but I was afraid to admit it even to myself. Even now, schoolyard calls echo: ‘Boys to soccer, girls to skipping.’ I knew that the boys enlisted in the elite paratrooper units and we, girls, embroidered shirts for them. I hated myself—and them. Today I can say it.”

Navah (born in Israel in the late 1940s): “I served on a military settlement with my youth movement. I was one of the most prominent girls in the group—even before the army. Our settlement made a decision to build a henhouse and the group had to decide who to send for training. Everyone knew that I loved chicken farming and that my life’s dream was to do this training. Since I was one of the most dominant people in the group, I was absolutely sure I would be chosen. To my astonishment they selected Yigal, a boy from Jerusalem, an intellectual type. We all knew he would leave the kibbutz as soon as he could. The reason for the group’s decision? This was a man’s job, they said, especially since it meant being a coordinator and overseeing the work of others. The memory is still painful for me. Needless to say, the group sent two girls to be trained as cooks.

“After a while I became so disappointed with the kibbutz that I asked to be transferred to another one. When the kibbutz secretariat was informed, our leader tried to convince me to stay. He said to me, ‘I know you’re leaving because you haven’t found a boyfriend.’ I am angry that this nonsense still hurts.”

Ashkenazi women did not become bridge builders between tradition and revolution by their own choice. They acted within a particular framework of power relations that established the dominance and superiority of men’s culture and belittled both women and Jewish tradition.

The new national culture developed the symbolism of a “muscular Judaism,” a term coined by Max Nordau, a leading early 20th century Zionist thinker, in which masculinity, physical strength and valor are central organizing images (see, for example, [Elboim-Dror, 1992](#)). “[I]mages of robust male power that were foreign to Judaism” were prominent in descriptions of the New Jew in poetry, art, literature and the media ([Almog, 1997, pp. 132–135](#)). Some of the earliest male *halutzim* (pioneers) wanted to create a “men’s community,” a male-only community with homoerotic markers ([Mintz, 1995, Chap. 17](#)). Another discourse was the worship of the military, which began in the 1950s. Central to the idealization of the army was an emphasis on adventure and heroism ([Almog, 1997, p. 209](#)). Zionist masculinity was perceived to be tough, aggressive, conquering, active, dominant and unemotional ([Hazelton, 1978](#)). In early Zionist ideology, masculine Zionism stood in opposition to the effeminate diaspora. “In the eyes of pioneer men, the transition from Jew to Zionist was crossing a border between feminine passivity and masculine activity, between feminine compliance and masculine vigor. . . . Zionism [was] a ‘reconfirmation’ of Jewish masculinity that renewed its potency after an endless and oppressive period of impotence” ([Hazelton, 1978, p. 78](#)). Thus, a binary opposition based on gender was constructed between the diaspora and the Jewish State ([Shapira, 1992, p. 329](#)). The effeminate diaspora stood in contrast to the masculinity of the “New Jew.” The tendency to feminize the pre-Zionist experience reached its peak in the negative stigmatization of the Holocaust as effeminate ([Lentin, 2000](#)).

In this context, the Mothers’ generation operated not only in an *imagined* historical, cultural and territorial vacuum which, though imagined, was nevertheless occupied by the “New Hebrew” man, but also in a *real* sexual vacuum created by an aggressive male culture that blocked all avenues to developing an autonomous women’s identity.

Ashkenazi women, therefore, were suspended between two identities, the national–political Zionist identity and traditional Jewish religion and culture, between the “New (Male) Jew” and the traditional Jewish wife and mother. Ashkenazi women struggled to embrace both worlds while, at the same time, they continuously sought an independent identity that both deconstructs and continues the past. Characterized by endless vacuum, a continuous absence, Ashkenazi women’s search for identity became a central element of their experience. For women, it was simply impossible to have a coherent Sabra or “New Jew” identity.

Ashkenazi women's search for identity was blocked by male domination and by the ideology of equality inherent in revolutionary Zionist thought, which was erroneously assumed to guarantee equality to women (Bernstein, 1987; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1992, 1997; Swirski & Safir, 1991). The generation of mothers who came to Palestine from Europe in the 1930s, and my generation, the daughters raised in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, had only two options. The first was to accept the separate-but-(seemingly) equal role Zionism assigned to women, that of the traditional wife and mother, and participate in nation building as the helpmate of the New Jew. The second was to strive for equality with men, but without challenging the male model as an ideal for both sexes. This option necessitated erasing any relic of the feminine. Such women in socialist agricultural settlements wore their hair short, dressed carelessly in loose shirts and slacks that revealed sun-tanned bodies and strong muscles. Their urban version meant a tailored suit and a stylish James Bond briefcase. For the settlement women, the ultimate test was milking the cows, an activity that became a symbol of women's ability "to take an active part in achieving the highest goal of the Zionist movement's agricultural settlements in their early days: the creation of the New Jew who lives on the land from which he brings forth his bread" (Ben Artzi, 1995, p. 322).

Thus, two seemingly contradictory female role models emerged: The woman wearing a ponytail and pinafore—feminine, soft, angelic—and, next to her, the woman with a hoe and the knife, a dairy-woman, a farmer, vigorous, tough-skinned. But these two Israeli female archetypes, despite their difference, have a common origin: both were constructs of the dominant male culture, the former a complement of the male ideal, the latter its replication. In both cases, the male stands at the centre as the defining subject. In both cases, the emergence of an autonomous female identity was obviated.

In return for accepting either of these roles, Ashkenazi women were allowed to associate with the hegemonic centre and enjoy its privileges. Material gains were given priority over liberation. The third option—constructing an independent identity, a "New Hebrew Woman," exacted a heavy price: being denied the privilege that comes with being accepted by the hegemonic group. For that reason, probably, this option was never considered.

Ashkenazi mothers' role in shaping the new secular Judaism—by constructing a system of rituals, customs, values and norms—was perceived

merely as part of women's responsibility to the family. Zionist ideology ignored women's roles within their homes, families and neighborhoods, and overlooked their crucial contribution to the construction of the new secular Judaism and dominant Israeli culture.

The acceptance by the hegemonic centre not only required women's acceptance of male dominance, but also the adoption of Ashkenaziness as an exclusive model. Although in theory women had unlimited options in the construction of a secular Judaism that would bridge revolution and tradition, the first generations of Israeli women turned exclusively to familiar European Jewish tradition. This choice, however, had long-term political implications in that it silenced the "other," *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) and Mizrahi Jews, and contributed to the process by which Westernism filled the imagined vacuum that was Israeli culture.

Ashkenazi women's experience in Israel was tempered by a complex system of exclusion and inclusion. Associated with the dominant center, they nevertheless occupied its margins. Themselves oppressed within a masculine culture, they also contributed to the oppression of the "other." Neither subversive nor revolutionary, the Ashkenazi women's experience served to strengthen the patriarchal order and the existing power structures while it dissolved and became a non-identity, non-entity, another vacuum. Since no autonomous identity was constructed, since the option of association with the centre was selected, Ashkenazi women found themselves locked in a vacuum of emptiness and oppression.

The Mothers' generation went to its death faceless, worn out by hard work, scarred by pain, and silenced unto madness. Their frustration and lack of satisfaction were transmitted to the Daughters' generation, who at first followed their mothers' ways. However, 1970s feminism, 1980s women's organized struggles for peace, and 1990s lesbianism, enabled the daughters to develop an autonomous female identity and reshape their world. The daughters were able to continue the journey of exploration begun by Ashkenazi women at the beginning of the Zionist undertaking, but this time they moved in new directions that could liberate them from the gigantic shadow of the male Sabra, the "new Jew" of the Zionist dream.

For me and other women, feminist consciousness opened the way to alternative female identities, and gradually liberated us from our paralyzing fear of the masculine Israeli hero. Gradually we began to develop our own voices and styles. Feminism pro-

vided the context in which to struggle against our own backgrounds and culture, and it showed us that our femaleness was a treasure and not a shameful weakness.

The wars of the 1980s (the invasion of Lebanon, the 1987–1993 Intifada, the first Palestinian uprising) provided the backdrop for expanding our feminist consciousness to include an understanding of the connections between the Israeli military occupation of a foreign nation and Israeli men's occupation of women's bodies (see *Shadmi, 2000; Sharoni, 1995*). Although I had opposed the occupation for many years, feminism taught me to take my protest to the streets and to put my new female voice in the public sphere. I have finally found a channel for participating in Zionist nation building and Jewish *tikkun olam* (the Jewish tradition of working for social reform).

For some women, the lesbian pride movement and coming out in growing numbers signaled another option. Lesbians, opposed to the mandatory heterosexuality of the "new Jew," joined feminist and peace activists in challenging the dominant universality of masculinity as normative and in celebrating the emergence of new female norms.

Each of these developments shattered the accepted Israeli norms and opened up new worlds. They enabled Ashkenazi women in Israel to fill the imagined vacuum of Zionism with a liberated, revolutionary female existence.

However, for me and other women in the Ashkenazi circles in which I moved, whichever of these options we chose, we also chose to maintain our contact with the hegemonic centre and to distance ourselves from Mizrahis. By employing conformist practices (as described below) we were able to avoid damaging our elitist position, while being active in transformative and revolutionary feminist groups. Thus, a new identity, simultaneously subversive and conformist, began to characterize many Ashkenazi women. Our activism in the movements that sought to transform Israeli society, women, peace and gay groups, made it possible for us to maintain an identity that at once undermined and supported the hegemony: we became both insiders and outsiders. Therefore, we were not required to pay a personal price for our protest against oppression (cf., *Sasson-Levi, 1995*).

The women's peace movement in Israel is an example of how practices that conform to the norms of the hegemonic center can be incorporated into the ethos of an otherwise radical opposition to the centre (see *Shadmi, 1993, 2000*). These feminist organizations had a more or less hierarchical structure, despite

an ideology of collective and egalitarian leadership. The protest strategies used were in the main traditional (demonstrations, petitions, conferences, etc.), except—significantly—the entrance of women to the public sphere as citizens in their own right. But the most fundamental conformist practice in the women's peace movement was its elitist and homogeneous composition, especially the exclusion of Mizrahi women, also existed in other feminist organizations. It ranged from ignoring their interests in the struggle for peace and social change (for example, ignoring the economic implications of the Oslo Accords for Mizrahi and other working-class people), to developing a feminist agenda that ignored their interests (for example, giving priority to the advancement of women in senior management, boardrooms and politics, but not to fighting poverty), to the actual expression of contempt, hostility and open discrimination (*Hacham, 1996*).

Not wishing to disconnect ourselves from the privileges that come with being Ashkenazi, we chose to oppose and undermine, but not to rebel. Thus, we maintained our separation from the Mizrahi community, a defining characteristic of Ashkenazi Zionism. The women's movement, the peace movement and the gay pride movement have ignored Mizrahi culture and interests and have refused to recognise difference. Through marginalizing Mizrahi women (as well as, to some extent, Palestinian women and lesbians) we reproduced and strengthened the central mechanism of oppression of patriarchal culture; which was how Ashkenazi women activists maintained their position within Israel's elite.

In contrast to the rejection of Mizrahi women, the women's peace and feminist movements were relatively open to Palestinian women, which made it possible to carry on an alternative discourse that shed light on the parallels between national and sexual oppression and exposed the violent dimensions of Israeli-style masculinity. But this openness was only possible as far as it did not personally challenge the activists to take sides. There were two major events in which such openness demanded a personal price. One was the Gulf War and the other the Oslo Accords. In both cases supporting Palestinian women required Israeli women to turn against the broad Israeli consensus. The choice was one of stepping beyond or remaining within the limits of the norms of the hegemonic center. These events precipitated the gradual disintegration of Women in Black. The women's peace movement soon became institutionalized and lost its subversive edge (*Shadmi, 2000*).

Mizrahi feminists' protest against their exclusion and oppression within the Israeli women's movement, which began in the 1990s (Dahan-Kalev, 1997; Daor, 1995; Shiran, 1996; Shoat, 1996) forced us to examine ourselves in an entirely new way. As a result Ashkenazi women are beginning to uncover oppressive practices and take responsibility for societal discrimination against Mizrahi people. Mizrahi women demanded that Ashkenazi feminists pay the price for their revolutionary pretension by narrowing the gap between our vision of a just society and our oppressive behavior. Ashkenazi women were obliged to confront our racism and to give up our privilege, at least within feminist circles.

When Ashkenazi women were confronted with the gap between ideology and practice and realized that our ideology demanded personal sacrifice, many Ashkenazi feminists chose to give up revolutionary protest, and some abandoned the struggle altogether. Many redefined the terms of their feminism so that achieving their goals would not conflict with the agenda of the hegemonic center. For example, one Ashkenazi woman, a life-long feminist activist, said more than once that she would have nothing more to do with the annual feminist conference, because it no longer fulfilled her needs, but she would continue the struggle in ways that suited her better, such as teaching, lecturing and writing. By pulling back into such insular activities, this former activist was able to avoid the Mizrahi challenge.

In the 1990s Ashkenazi women had to re-construct our identity on the thin line between exclusion and inclusion. But this time the choice is not so unequivocal, for it is possible to both be and not be within the hegemonic centre, to undermine it without destroying it. Ashkenazi women who choose this path become no more than a brush stroke in the hegemonic picture, another layer in the Israeli power structure. In so doing, they retreat from the path of feminists who see the women's movement as a revolutionary, critical and radical force. The need to retain power can thus block Ashkenazi women's journey of exploration, leaving their yearning for fulfillment and self-definition unsatisfied.

### IN PLACE OF A SUMMARY

In this article I have presented some stories of Ashkenazi women or, rather, my reading of their stories. I tried to describe Ashkenazi women's experience in their own words while at the same time attempting to uncover its hidden cultural and political meaning.

Following Ella Shoat's challenging work, I "attempt to remap the shape-shifting modalities of oppression and empowerment, recognizing that 'oppression' and 'empowerment' are themselves relational terms. Individuals can occupy more than one position, being empowered on one axis (class, say) but not on the other (such as sexuality)" (Shoat, 1998, p. 4). In order to emphasise the power relations involved in the various positions and relations, I named this multi-positioning of Ashkenazi women "the powerful powerless" in my introductory remarks. In this article, I attempted to show how this positioning manifests itself in Ashkenazi white existence of some Jewish women in Israel—how they occupy a privileged racialized position vis-a-vis, for example, Mizrahi women and men in both the pre-State and State eras, yet they occupy an oppressed gendered position vis-a-vis men. In the last analysis, however, I suggest here that the position of power prevails, that is, the "Talking Visions" (as Shoat calls her book), the relationality between positions, is trapped within power relations in which the powerful refuse to give up their hegemonic position—the same way the Mothers' generation refused to search for a "New Hebrew Woman," an autonomous liberated existence, and the Daughters' generation excluded Mizrahi women in return for the privileges associated with the hegemonic centre.

Not less important for me was to make Ashkenazi whiteness visible, to make it an issue in cultural, political, academic and feminist discourse. In racializing Ashkenazi whiteness I attempted to show it as a "permeable interwoven rationality" (Shoat, 1998, p. 4), yet, successfully concealing its racialized existence behind ideologically constructed myths (the imagined vacuum and the three negations) or by using mechanisms of exclusions (as the Israeli feminist, peace and lesbian movements do).

I also wished to tell a story here: Israeli feminist scholarship has relied on two narratives to describe women's status and the construction of female identity in Israel: the first is the overt narrative of the oppression of women by patriarchy, a narrative first put forth in the pioneering book, *Double Bind* (Izraeli, Fridman, Schrift, Raday, & Buber-Agassi, 1982). The second narrative is that of the underground woman who lives a hidden life in order to escape patriarchal oppression, but who is ultimately exposed because of the subversive uses she makes of the identity she has been given (for example, Lubin, 1995).

I wish to propose a third narrative: Women dialoguing with patriarchy, ready for the give and take. This seems to be the story of many women, not

only Ashkenazi. Lesbians have joined with gay men in the common “queer” struggle, and Mizrahi feminists have allied with Mizrahi men for a joint socio-political (post-colonial) struggle against Ashkenazi oppression (cf., MacKinnon, 1996; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996).

Each of the three narratives includes different stories—distinguished by class, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation, that is, by the position of women in the social and economic hierarchy of power, delineating different experiences and identities.

The fourth narrative, suggested here, highlights the missing revolutionary element. The desire to transform the existing order indeed exists, but the willingness needed to uproot existing systems, concepts and relationships does not. Nor does a vision of Ashkenazi women’s autonomous identity based on our own experience exist. Ashkenazi women in Israel do not have a liberated and autonomous identity. Vacuum is still the order of the day, although, as this article suggests, the absence of a coherent identity may allow Ashkenazi women to encounter the new (people, ideas, concepts) and enable them to explore, deconstruct and reconstruct oppression and domination, tradition and revolution, Zionism and Judaism, feminism, peace activism and lesbianism, ethnicity and nationality. And these are, perhaps, the organizing principles of Israeli Ashkenazi women’s existence.

## ENDNOTES

1. The Hebrew term Ashkenazi refers to Jews originally from Central Europe, especially Germany, who dispersed to Eastern Europe and later to North America. It stands in contrast to Sephardic Jew (after the Hebrew word *Sepharad*, meaning Spain) whose ancestors came from Spain or Portugal and settled in North Africa, the Middle East and South America. Following the immigration of Sephardic Jews to Israel—mainly during the 1950s and the 1960s—they began to be called Mizrahi Jews (after the Hebrew word *Mizrach*, meaning East). Ashkenazi Jews were those who initiated the Zionist movement—the national liberation movement of the Jews—and founded the main Jewish settlements and Zionist institutions in the pre-State era that later became State institutions. As this article suggests, these terms are not politically neutral but reflect power relations and social positioning. On Ashkenaziness as a racialized category, see Shetrit (1999) and Shoat (2001).
2. Women in Black is a network of all-woman weekly vigils protesting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The women stand each Friday, since January 1988 (with some breaks), for an hour in central locations in Israel wearing black clothing and holding signs on which is written “Stop the Occupation.” Their strategy of protest has been adopted by women in other countries, either to protest the Israeli occupation or to struggle for local causes. For analysis of their practice, see Emmett (1996), Helman and Rapoport (1997), and Shadmi (2000).
3. I am grateful to Ester Eilam from whom I first heard of this paradigm in the feminist context in her talk at the conference on “Violence Against Women: Critical Feminist Perspectives,” held in Tel Aviv University, May 1995 (Eilam, 1995). See also Mohanty (1985).
4. All names are pseudonyms. Since in most cases I was unable to tape record or take notes at the time the women told their stories, all the narratives are based on memory. However, I wrote all the women’s stories close to the time of their telling. When writing I made a special effort to retain each speaker’s style. While not always successful, I attempted to respect the content and spirit of the women’s stories.
5. *Shtetl* means town in Yiddish (Jewish German) and it refers to Jewish towns in which many of the East European Jews lived until the Second World War.
6. *Mendele Mocher Sefarim* is the pseudonym of one of the founding fathers of modern Hebrew literature.
7. The Arabic word *Sabra* refers originally to the fruit of a cactus growing widely in Palestine. It was adopted by early Zionists to nickname Israeli-born, and quickly became a cultural archetype referring metaphorically to what was considered the prickly exterior and the tender heart of Israeli-born children and to distinguish the healthy and proud Israeli-born from diaspora Jews and Zionist pioneers (for its elaboration and history, see Almog, 1997, especially pp. 14–26).
8. This analysis leans on the work of Guillaumin (1995) and Delphy (1984). Both argue that the actual oppression of blacks and women and the appropriation of their labor created relevant social categories and sexist and racist ideologies.
9. See Frankenberg (1993, p. 43) on the concept of “social geography” in the context of racist practices and the construction of white identity in the United States.
10. Kibbutz is a form of collective settlement developed by early Zionists and which became a symbol of the State of Israel (Kibbutzim in the plural).
11. Development towns are settlements in the periphery to which Mizrahi people were sent upon arriving in Israel. They suffer from low level of education, limited work options (often as unskilled laborers), high rate of unemployment and poverty—usually attributed to discrimination by the absorbing community (see, for example, Samoocha, 1993; Swirski & Bernstein, 1993).
12. The striking forces of the Haganah—The voluntary Jewish self-defense organization, established in Palestine, especially against Arab attacks, during the British Mandate period.
13. Jewish laws require observing certain cooking dictates, including not eating dairy and meat at the same time and using different dishes for dairy and meat foods.
14. The Jewish holiday marking the historical event of the Israelites leaving Egypt and receiving the Bible.
15. Yom Kippur is the holiest Jewish holy day. It is a day of fasting and prayer. It is the day when Jews ask for forgiveness for their sins.
16. A ritual bath an observant Jew takes regularly and an observant woman must take after her period.



17. In terms of the political and social status of women, the mothers' functions are problematic since they preserve patriarchal institutions (family, motherhood, religion) and appropriate motherhood for national missions (Berkovitch, 1999).

## REFERENCES

- Almog, Oz (1997). *The Sabra—a profile*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers.
- Azmon, Yael (Ed.) (1995). *A view into the lives of women in Jewish Societies: Collected essays*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Centre for Jewish History.
- Ben Artzi, Yossi (1995). Between farmers and laborers: The woman in the beginning of the settlement in Eretz Israel (1882–1914). In Yael Azmon (Ed.), *A view into the lives of women in Jewish societies: Collected essays*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Centre for Jewish History.
- Berkovitch, Nitsa (1999). Women of valor: Women and citizenship in Israel. *Israeli Sociology*, 2(1), 277–317.
- Bernstein, Deborah (1987). *The struggle for equality: Urban women workers in pre-state Israeli society*. New York: Praeger.
- Collins, Patricia Hill (1990). *Black feminist thought*. New York: Routledge.
- de Beauvoir, Simon (1953). *The second sex*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dahan-Kalev, Henriette (1997). The oppression of women by other women: Relations and struggle between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Women in Israel. *Israel Social Science Research*, 12(1), 31–44.
- Daor, Erella (1995, winter). When a fight is needed. I am fighting: A conversation with Tikva Levi. *Noga*, 28, 17–24.
- Delphy, Christine (1984). *Close to home: A materialist analysis of women's oppression*. London: Hutchinson.
- Eilam, Ester (1995). "Some comments on the perception of rape," a paper delivered at the "violence against women in Israel: Critical feminist perspectives" conference. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- Elboim-Dror, Rachel (1992). Women in the Zionist Utopia. *Katedra*, 66, 145–162.
- Emmett, Ayala (1996). *Our sisters' promised land: Women, politics, and Israeli–Palestinian coexistence*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Evron, Bo'az (1997, June 10). Mozart's music about the issue of an egg which was not born. *Ha'aretz*, H1.
- Fogiel-Bijaoui, Sylvie (1992). From revolution to motherhood: The case of women in the Kibbutz, 1910–1948. In Deborah Bernstein (Ed.), *Pioneers and homemakers: Jewish women in pre-state Israel*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Fogiel-Bijaoui, Sylvie (1997). Women in Israel: The social construction of citizenship as non-issue. *Israel Social Science Research*, 12(1), 1–30.
- Foucault, Michel (1981). *The history of sexuality: Volume one, an introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Frankenberg, Ruth (1993). *The social construction of whiteness: White women, race matters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gluzman, Mikki (1997, Winter). The yearning for heterosexuality: Sexuality and nationality in Altenueiland. *Theory and Criticism*, 11, 145–163.
- Guillaumin, Collette (1995). *Racism, sexism, power and ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Hacham, Ronit (1996, March–April). We are here and this is ours. *Mitzad Shenit*, 2, 23–26.
- Hazelton, Lesley (1978). *Israeli women: The reality behind the myth (Trans. Naomi Gal)*. Jerusalem: Idanim.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Helman, Sara, & Rapoport, Tamar (1997, Summer). 'These are Ashkenazi women, alone, whores of Arafat, don't believe in God, and don't love Erez Israel': Women in black and the challenging of the social order. *Theory and Criticism*, 10, 175–192.
- Hitron, Hagay (1996, October 25). The fucked Ashkenazim and the little Turkish. *Ha'aretz Magazine*, 5.
- Hoagland, Sra Lucia (1988). *Lesbian ethics: Toward new value*. Palo Alto, CA: The Institute of Lesbian Studies.
- Hooks, Bell (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hyman, Paula E. (1997). *Gender and assimilation in modern Jewish History: The roles and representation of women (Trans. Tal Ilan)*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Centre.
- Izraeli, Dafna, Fridman, Ariella, Schrifit, Ruth, Raday, Frances, & Buber-Agassi, Judith (1982). *The double bind: Women in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad.
- Kahati-Bruner, Neomi (1997, June 13). The color of economics. *Ha'aretz Magazine*.
- Kalderon, Ruth (1997, June 10). New Hebrew Jews. *Ha'aretz*, B2.
- Lentin, Ronit (2000). *Israel and the daughters of the Shoah: Reoccupying the territories of silence*. Oxford: Bergham Books.
- Lubin, Orly (1995, Winter). A home and a nation in Debora Baron. *Theory and Criticism*, 7, 159–177.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. (1996). From practice to theory, or what is a white woman anyway? In Dianne Bell & Renate Klein (Eds.), *Radically speaking: Feminism reclaimed* (pp. 45–54). Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex.
- Mintz, Matityahu (1995). *The Shomeri movement 1921–1911*. Jerusalem: The Zionist Library of the World's Zionist Histadrut.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1985). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse. *Boundary*, 2(12/3 and 13/1), 333–358.
- Motzafi-Haller, Pnina (1997, Winter). You have an authentic voice: An anthropological research and politics of representation inside and outside the researched society. *Theory and Criticism*, 11, 81–98.
- Peled, Rina (1995, May). 'The new man' of 'Hashomer Hatsair' from the beginning of the movement in Europe in 1913 and until the establishment of the Hashomer Hatsair Party in Erets Israel in 1946. A PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University.
- Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Samoocha, Sami (1993). Class, ethnic and national cleavages and democracy in Israel. In Uri Ram (Ed.), *Israeli society: Critical perspectives* (pp. 172–202). Tel Aviv: Breirot.
- Sasson-Levi, Orna (1995). *Radical rhetorics, conformist practices: Theory and Praxis in an Israeli protest movement*. Shane Working Papers No. 1, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Social Sciences Faculty.
- Shadmi, Erella (1993, December). Women in black: Social discourse in the streets. A paper presented in the conference on "women and nationality in Israeli society". The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Jerusalem.

- Shadmi, Erella (2000). Between revolution and conformism, feminism and nationalism: Women in black in Israel. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23(1), 23–34.
- Shapira, Anita (1992). *Land and power*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.
- Sharoni, Simona (1995). *Gender and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: The politics of women's resistance*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Shemer, Naomi (1967). *All my songs—Kol Ha-Shirim* (p. 40). Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot.
- Shetrit, Sami Shalom (1999). *The Ashkenazi revolution is dead: Reflections on Israel from a dark angle—a collection of articles 1992–1999*. Tel Aviv: Kedem Publishing.
- Shiran, Vicki (1992). Feminist identity vs. oriental identity. In Barbara Swirski & Marilyn Safir (Eds.), *Calling the equality bluff: Women in Israel* (pp. 303–311). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Shiran, Vicki (1996, September–October). Mizrahi women and others. *Mitzad Shenit*, 5–6, 26–29.
- Shoat, Ella (1996). Mizrahi feminism: The politics of gender, Race and Multiculturalism. *Mitzad Shenit*, 6, 29–33.
- Shoat, Ella (Ed.) (1998). *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*. New York and Cambridge, MA: New Museum of Contemporary Arts and the MIT Press.
- Shoat, Ella (2001). *Forbidden reminiscences: A collection of essays*. Translated to Hebrew by Yael Ben-Zvi, edited by Goren-Gurmezano and A'aron Refael. Tel Aviv: Kedem Publishing and the Author.
- Stite, Richard (1989). *Revolutionary dreams: Utopian vision and experimental life in Russian Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swirski, Barbara, & Safir, Marilyn P. (Eds.) (1991). *Calling the equality bluff: Women in Israel*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Swirski, Shlomo, & Bernstein, Debra (1993). “Who worked doing what? For whom? And what for?” The economic development of Israel and the evolution of ethnic division of labor. In Uri Ram (Ed.), *Israeli society: Critical perspectives* (pp. 120–147). Tel Aviv: Breirot.
- Thompson, Denise (2001). *Radical feminism today*. London: Sage.
- Wilkinson, Sue, & Kitzinger, Celia (1996). The Queer backlash. In Dianne Bell & Renate Klein (Eds.), *Radically speaking: Feminism reclaimed* (pp. 375–382). Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex.
- Ya'ari, Eliezer (1996, October 26). Why I am blamed? *Ha'aretz Magazine*, 7.